The consequence argument

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Jeff Speaks

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There are different ways of developing van Inwagen's central argument – the consequence argument – for incompatibilism. What follows is one way of developing this argument which stays pretty close to van Inwagen's text.

Begin with the following definition of determinism:

> A world is deterministic iff every conditional statement of the form
>
> (STATE & L) → FUTURE-EVENT
>
> in which 'STATE' abbreviates a description of the complete state of the world at a time, 'L' is a complete list of the laws of nature in that world, and 'FUTURE-EVENT' is the name of some event in the future relative to the time of 'STATE', is either metaphysically necessary or metaphysically impossible.

This is a way of making precise the idea that, if the laws of nature are deterministic, then the laws (given the state of the world at a time) fix a unique future for that world.

To get the consequence argument started, we then make a few assumptions about the scope of our free will:

A. We are not free with respect to the laws of nature.

B. We are not free with respect to events in the actual past.

C. We are not free with respect to metaphysically necessary or metaphysically impossible states of affairs.

These assumptions all seem quite plausible. To run the argument we then need the 'no choice principle', which I restate here as a principle about what we have and do not have free will with respect to:

> If we are not free with respect to p, and we are not free with respect to the fact that if p, then q, we are not free with respect to q.

This principle also strikes many people as plausible. What it says is that if I have no free with with respect to A, and no free will with respect to the connection between A and B, I have no free will with respect to B.

We can then run the argument as follows. As above, I let 'STATE' be a name for a complete description of the universe at some time in the actual past, and 'L' abbreviate a complete list of the actual laws of nature. 'ACTION' is the name of some arbitrary future action.

1. We are not free with respect to STATE. (A)
2. We are not free with respect to L. (B)
3. We are not free with respect to (STATE & L). (1,2)
4. Necessarily, if (STATE & L) then ACTION. (Determinism)
5. We are not free with respect to the fact that if (STATE & L) then ACTION. (4, C)
6. If we are not free with respect to (STATE & L), and we are not free with respect to the fact that if (STATE & L) then ACTION, we are not free with respect to ACTION. (instance of the No Choice Principle)

C. We are not free with respect to ACTION. (3,5,6)

This is an example of conditional proof: arguing from the assumption that p to the conclusion that q to establish the conditional conclusion that if p, then q. The conditional conclusion established by the above argument is:

> If determinism is true, then we are not free with respect to any future action.